

VIRGINIA WILDLIFE

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2020

FOUR DOLLARS



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Searching
for Sheds



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Back Cover: Despite this grumpy look, bluebirds are happy for our help. Page 5. © Lexi Meadows

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MOLLY KIRK
Editor

Greetings and Happy New Year! As a longtime reader of Virginia Wildlife magazine and a lifelong outdoors enthusiast, I'm thrilled to have joined the talented team at the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries as Creative Content Manager and the new editor of Virginia Wildlife.

Virginia Wildlife and DGIF's other publications have a remarkable history of excellence in stories and photography, and I'm honored to play a role in shaping their future. I'm looking forward to not only continuing their traditions, but also finding new ways to spread the word about DGIF's efforts to conserve and protect the wildlife and open spaces that make Virginia so special.

Part of DGIF's mission is to connect Virginians with the unique opportunities available to them in the outdoors. I'm passionate about that mission, because Virginia's wide variety of outdoors experiences has helped shape who I am. Each day, I'm also a witness to just how unique and fulfilling the outdoor spaces of Virginia can be for future generations, as I'm raising a son who much prefers being on the banks of a river fishing or sitting quietly dressed in camo and blaze orange in the woods waiting for deer. I see the joy on his face as he discovers a red-spotted newt on a walk and crouches down to examine it closely. The lessons he's learning about understanding, respecting, and preserving the natural world around him are priceless.



This issue of Virginia Wildlife reflects the diversity of DGIF's mission with articles about how to create housing for bluebirds, good strategies for finding antler sheds, techniques for catching yellow perch, the artistry of a master fly-tier, and the good work of a retired Marine who teaches archery to youth. In addition, we're introducing a new chef with a fresh take on fish and game recipes in the Fare Game section.

It's an exciting time to be stewards of the wild! I can't wait to discover and share more great stories about the work DGIF does and about how Virginians enjoy the outdoors. If you have thoughts about the magazine or an idea for a person or topic you think would fit into Virginia Wildlife, feel free to drop me an email at Molly.Kirk@dgif.virginia.gov.

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Conserve and manage wildlife populations and habitat for the benefit of present and future generations. Connect people to Virginia's outdoors through boating, education, fishing, hunting, trapping, wildlife viewing and other wildlife-related activities. Protect people and property by promoting safe outdoor experiences and managing human-wildlife conflicts.

GIVING A HELPING HAND TO **BLUEBIRDS**

By Ed Simmons, Jr. • Photos by Lexi Meadows





Native Americans and settlers prized Eastern bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*) for their voracious bug-gobbling and brilliant blue beauty. In song and legend, they delivered happiness on their wings.

Once prevalent as robins, their numbers seriously declined in the 1920s through the 1970s. Urban sprawl, pesticides, herbicides and habitat loss all shared blame. But the primary reason? Competition for cavity nesting sites.

Woodpeckers carve out the sites, but then aggressive house sparrows and European starlings take them over. Both invaders are introduced species. The vexatious house sparrows even destroy bluebird eggs and peck the young and adults to death and then build their nest on top of the old bluebird nest. Into this drama enters the Virginia Bluebird Society.

With 513 members, the Virginia Bluebird Society is tending specially built bluebird houses—over 5,000—in two-thirds of Virginia counties.

“They take so readily to the boxes we provide, making it a rewarding pastime,” says Sandy Weber, a member in Montgomery County. “Bluebird populations are dependent on humans for nesting cavities.”

The entry hole to a box is an inch and a half in diameter, too much of a squeeze for starlings. Each box is monitored weekly, spring and summer. If house sparrows build nests, they are removed. Each box, given three broods, can produce as many as 15 bluebirds in a season.

For the Society nest box monitors, there is satisfaction in knowing they are increasing bluebird numbers. There is also the joy of associating with bluebirds. “Bluebirds have so much personality and become very tolerable of people,” says Lexi Meadows, a member and wildlife photographer in Pittsylvania County. “You can train them to come and feed [on mealworms] by calling them.”

Primarily insectivores, bluebirds will devour caterpillars, grubs, grasshoppers, spiders, ants, crickets, beetles, butterflies,

moths, mosquitos, and other insects. In the cold winter months, bluebirds turn to berries like holly, sumac, dogwood, pokeweed, and hackberries so another way to help bluebirds is to plant native pollinators and berry-producing shrubs.

Lexi has observed how the male feeds the female insects while she is incubating and helps clean the nest and feed the nestlings. When the time comes, the parents will beckon to the nestlings to fly.

After fledging, the youngsters are known to stay close to the nest box and help the parents feed the next brood. “They all stay together in a family unit,” says Anne Little who helped found the Virginia Bluebird Society in 1996. Even in the winter, bluebird families have been known to huddle together for warmth, sometimes in the same nest boxes that they fledged from.

Anne’s husband Carl designed the bluebird house now generally used, The Carl Little Bluebird Box (See pages 10-11). “There’s a lot of ventilation created for this box because of the heat we have

Previous page: A welcome sight for bluebirders, a nest with five eggs! Above left to right: The last chick of the brood hatches. After an egg hatches, adults remove the shells and drop them far from the nest site. Nestlings sometimes pretend to sleep when the nest box is opened.



in summer,” he says. A wire guard called a “Noel” protects the entry hole. A cylinder of sheet metal called a “Kingston” keeps snakes from climbing the pole to the box. In fall, ventilation holes are plugged with insulation, and as the cold of winter comes on, multiple bluebirds will huddle inside to keep warm.

I had an opportunity to go “a’blue-birding” at the invitation of Cathy Hindman, past president of the Society. To my surprise, she said we’d be visiting a golf course. I thought bluebirds preferred the woods, but no, wide open, mown, grassy spaces with scattered trees are preferred, all the more bugs!

Golf courses are perfect for this, along with parks, meadows, and cemeteries. Across Virginia, there are nearly 400 bluebird trails with intermittent nesting boxes, with 32 on golf courses.

At Potomac Shores Golf Club in Prince William County, I met up with Cathy and the new president, Valerie Kenyon-Gaffney, a merry pair infused with bluebird joy. The golf club is notable

for planting native species and pollinator gardens, limiting water use, low chemical use, no fertilizer run off, and carving out a slender course keeping most of the natural terrain. Former golf course superintendent Mike Owens invited the Society to erect bluebird houses. There are 10.

Valerie was my guide as we bounced off in a golf cart. No need for wilderness boots or survival knife here, just a sharp eye for streaking golf balls. The first box at the first green was not to be opened today, Valerie informed me. Two Fridays back, five babies were observed and, after 13 days, boxes aren’t opened. This prevents premature fledging. They usually fledge at 16 days.

Back in the cart, dodging golfers, we headed to the second. Valerie, checking her notes, approaches carefully, not sure if the babies have fledged. Close to the box, she whistles. No bluebirds flew out so she took a screwdriver, loosed a screw, and opened the side door. Sure enough, a nest, cupped and made of pine straw,

was empty. Valerie removed the nest and swept out the interior with a paint brush. “Hopefully I will come back next week and there will be a new nest here!” she said. Then, off we went to the third.

This box was occupied by tree swallows, who are welcome because they’re a native species. Chickadees too are welcome, along with wrens. The swallow nest was feathered but didn’t have eggs yet. Despite that, the worried adults darted around, keeping an eye on us. They have distinctive blue caps flashing the color of bluebirds.

At the fourth nest box, four bluebirds had fledged. The fifth was another tree swallow home. Valerie opened the door and peered inside with a mirror. “Five eggs in their little feather bed! Who doesn’t like a down comforter!” she said.

As we approached the sixth green, she exclaimed, “This will be exciting! We should see five little babies wanting to be fed.” But when she opened the box, we discovered the babies were fast asleep. “They’ve been well fed,” I said. “At the

Above left to right: Hungry mouths greet the nest box monitor. Chicks keep their parents busy, needing to be fed every 15-20 minutes. Once fledged, the chicks chase their parents around begging for food until they learn to feed themselves.



Both by © Ed Simmons, Jr.

Left to right: Cathy Hindman is ready to record data as Valerie Kenyon-Gaffney prepares to open a nest box. Valerie Kenyon-Gaffney peers into an open box using a mirror to see what resides in the nest. Note the wire entry guard, or Noel, and silver predator guard called a Kingston.

moment!” she replied. “Now we won’t open the box next week.”

At the seventh, five babies were expected to be fledged. Sure enough there was an empty nest.

The eighth was a tree swallow domicile with five small white eggs and a wasp nest on the ceiling. “We’ll do an eviction,” said Valerie. She removed the wasp nest and rubbed the ceiling with soap, which discourages future wasps. Meanwhile, the adults circle, making quite a racket. “Stop squawking at me! I’m making this place safe for your babies!” Valerie called out.

The ninth had ants, and Valerie rubbed Vaseline on the pole to discourage their invasion.

At the tenth and final box there was a partial bluebird nest. “That’s good! she said, “next week we should have eggs!”

Clambering back into the cart, Valerie was grinning, “So that’s our bluebird trail!” “Cool!” I said. And now I’ve caught the bluebird bug and want a trail of my own.

Long live the bluebirds! 🌿

Bird lover and squirrel enthusiast, freelancer Ed Simmons, Jr., lives in Caroline County.



Want to express your bluebird love and contribute to wildlife conservation?

Check out this license plate designed by wildlife artist **Spike Knuth!**

To get yours go to:

www.dmv.virginia.gov/vehicles/#splates/info.asp?idnm=WLCBB

DO YOU WANT TO GIVE A HELPING HAND TO BLUEBIRDS?

Placement & Care of Your Bluebird Box

- Choose appropriate bluebird habitat: a large, open area such as a meadow or field, away from buildings. Pastures with long rows of fencing are ideal because the bluebirds prefer hunting for insects over short grass. The existing fence also provides easily accessible posts on which to mount boxes. (Get permission first.) Just be mindful that unless protective measures are taken such as adding a Noel and a Kingston, snakes can get into boxes and eat eggs or chicks.
- Put the box up by mid-February. Bluebirds begin their seasonal movements in February, and male bluebirds begin establishing territory by mid-March, so you will want your box up as early as possible to increase the chance that it will be used. Once the female has arrived and chosen the nest site, it may be several weeks before the pair actually begin nest building.
- Be sure that the opening of the box is exactly 1½ inches in diameter. Anything larger will allow starlings to get in. Also, the box should be placed so that its opening faces southeast and away from the prevailing winds.
- Don't be discouraged if a bluebird pair does not choose your box right away or if you get the box up a little later in spring. Because of the shortage of suitable nesting sites, there's still a chance that a pair of birds that has been unsuccessful elsewhere may come along in early summer and try out your box.
- Breeding generally begins in April and lasts until the end of July. Bluebirds may lay from three to six pale blue eggs per clutch with an average of four or five. The female incubates the eggs for 12 to 16 days.
- If you are using a permanent (wooden) bluebird house with a side or top opening, you can periodically check on the eggs or nestlings up until they are about 12 days old. Disturbing them later in the nestling phase may cause them to "fledge" or leave the nest prematurely, which can reduce their chance of survival. Young bluebirds generally leave the nest between the 17th and 20th day.
- Once the young have left the nest, you may clean the box out (if it is designed to be opened).



Providing fresh water is one way of attracting bluebirds to your habitat.



One of the joys of putting up boxes is seeing them being used.

How to build: The Carl Little **BLUEBIRD** Box

Materials

Do NOT use pressure treated or composite wood.

5' of Standard Nominal 1" x 6" board

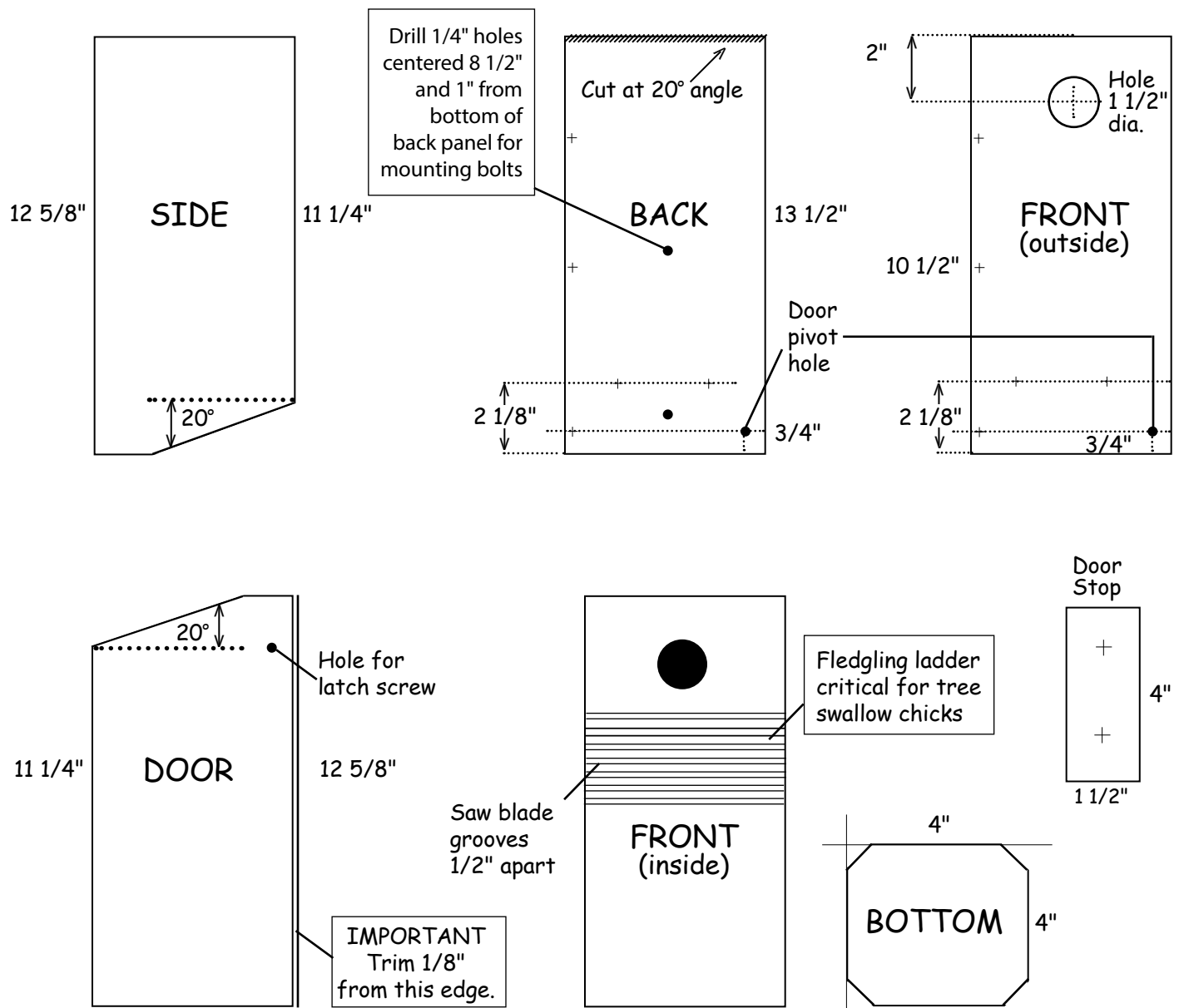
1' of Standard Nominal 1" x 10" board

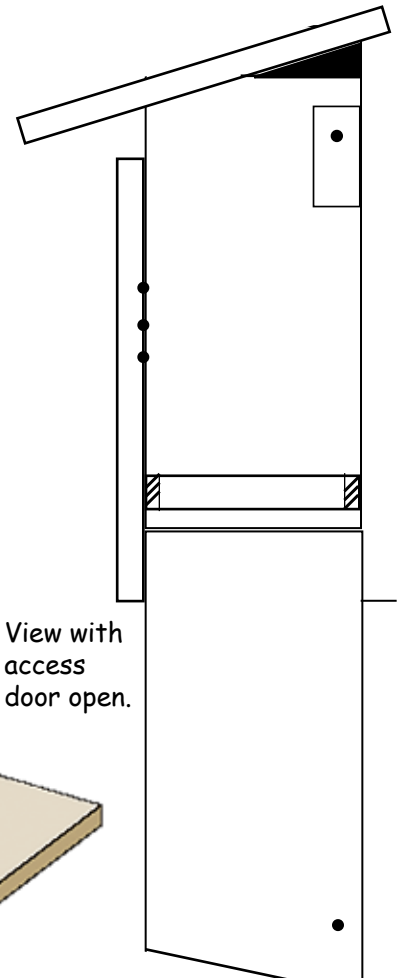
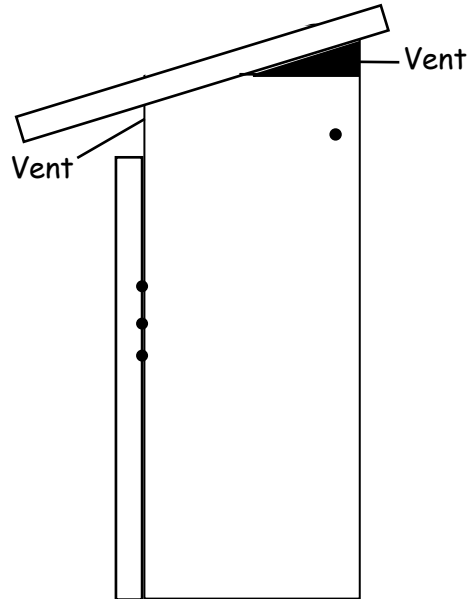
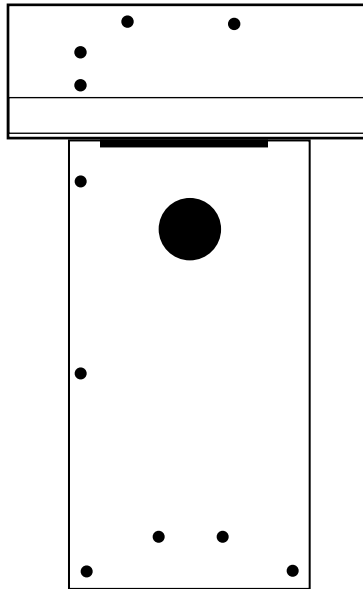
(or 2" x 10" board for a better insulated roof and less warping)

19 Galvanized Phillips head deck screws #8 x 1 3/8"

Exterior Painting

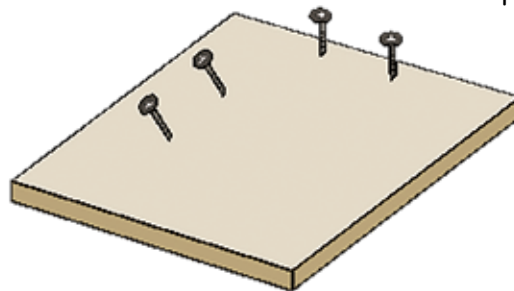
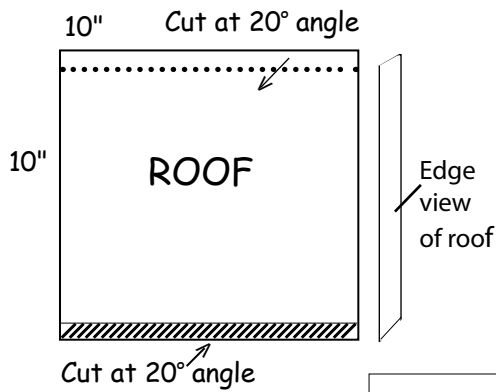
The exterior of the nest box may be painted with a water-based light colored paint (like acrylic) or sealant to extend the life of the box. Do not paint the interior of the box.



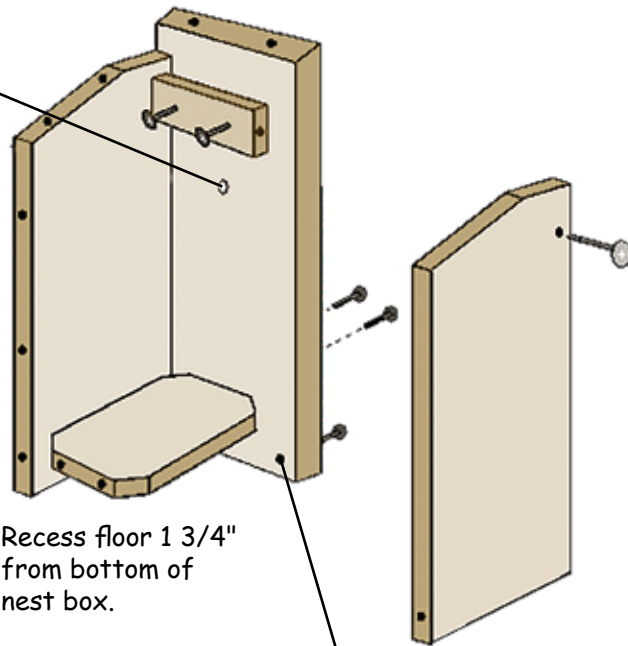


View with access door closed

View with access door open.



Drill 1/4" holes centered 8 1/2" and 1" back panel for mounting bolts.



Pre-drill pivot holes 3/4" from the bottom edge of front and back panels. Make holes slightly larger than screws.

RESOURCES



If you would like more information about bluebirds and building nest boxes, please check out the Virginia Bluebird Society's website at: www.virginiabluebirds.org

WARM UP TO YELLOW PERCH!

By Dr. Peter Brookes ■ Illustrations by Lynda Richardson / Shutterstock



When the frost and freeze of February come around, most anglers, like me, have had about as much as we can stand of being stuck indoors and away from our favorite fishing holes. The dreaded “cabin fever” takes hold and ranks right up there with the flu as an unwelcome winter illness.

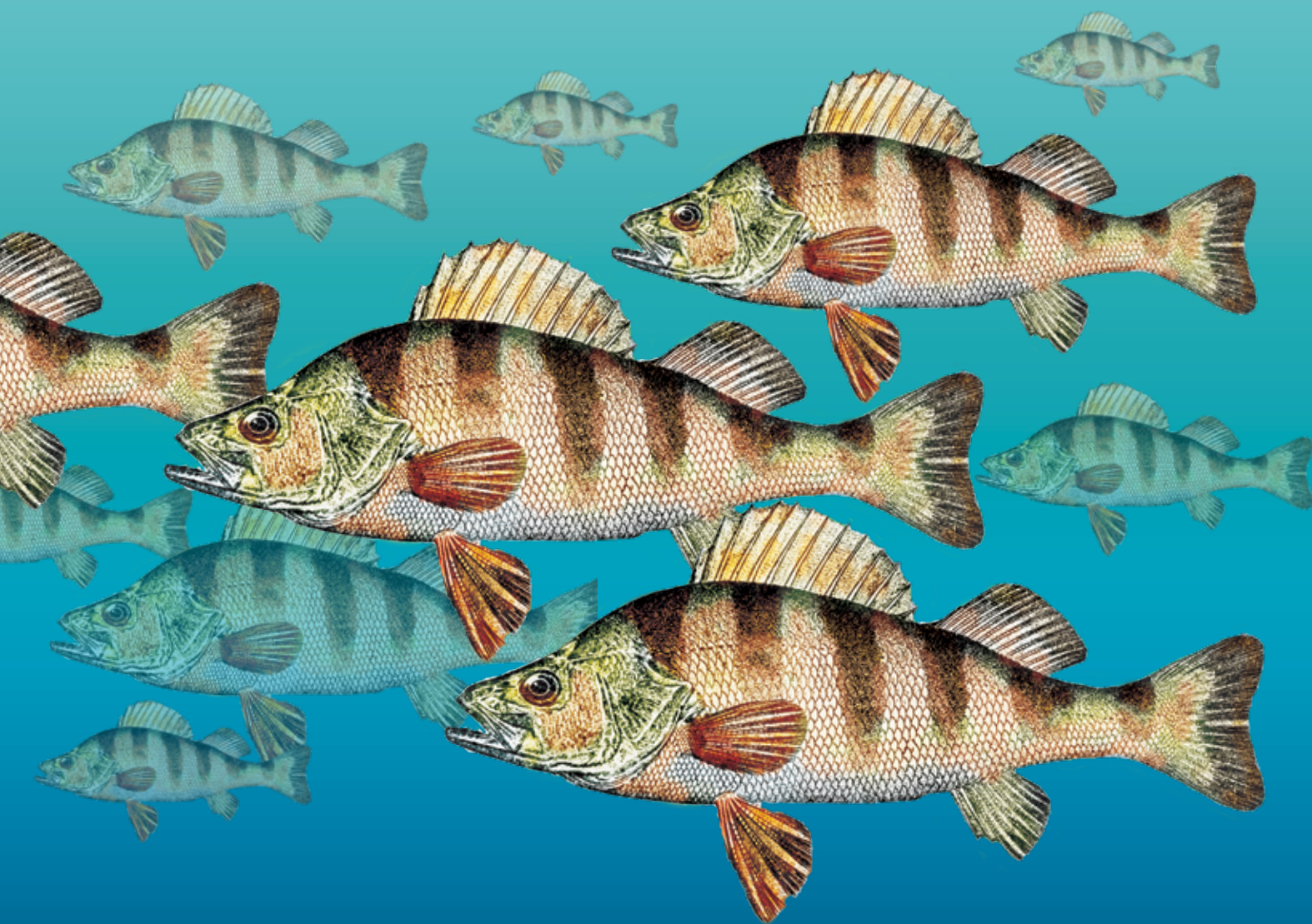
It’s true that we try to find some relief in tying flies or organizing fishing tackle while lounging in front of the final football games of the season, but that ends with the last play of the Super Bowl.

So, instead of longing for warmer weather, put on your warmest woolies and go outside. Yes, I said: “Go outside” because February is one of the best times of the year to fish for the colorful, hard fighting, and tasty yellow perch.

According to the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, yellow perch, also known as ring or raccoon perch, average 6 inches to 8 inches in length, but can get as big as 14

inches to 15 inches and weigh in at 1.5 pounds to 2 pounds. During the winter, these colorful fish are brilliant yellow with red-orange fins and dark vertical stripes. It should come as no surprise that *Perca flavescens* is a member of the perch family which also includes the walleye, sauger, and saugeye, some of the best freshwater-eating fish around. And you can keep up to 10 fish per day. So, what’s keeping you from fishing?

Despite mid-winter cold, yellow perch are getting ready to spawn in late February through early March when the water temperatures range between 45 degrees and 50 degrees. This pre-spawn activity means that these schooling fish, though cautious biters, can be quite willing to hit your lure or bait as long as it is the right bait presented at the right level in the water column. Able anglers tell me that, in the winter, you have to go deep for large yellow perch so think jigging for spin fishermen or for fly fishers consider a sinking tippet or sinking line.



Yellow perch are primarily sight feeders so they do not feed at night. Their prey includes juvenile fish, grass shrimp, and crayfish, to name a few. When using live bait, minnows are probably the best for hooking these fish. DGIF also recommends other live baits such as mummichogs, worms, and grubs. Yellow perch will even go after cut bait and pork rind. When using artificial lures, small spoons like ¼ oz. gold Silver Buddies, spinners, bucktails jigs, streamers, and vibrant colored tubes work as well.

Since the larger yellow perch prefer sticking close to the bottom, present your lure or bait accordingly, no more than 3 feet off of the bottom. Different lakes and tidal rivers vary in fishing strategies so feel free to change things up. While there are a lot of lures and bait that appeal to yellow perch they can sometimes be fussy. Like any fish, it may take some time to figure out what's working and what's not on any given day or waterway. But, heck, that's fishing.

Experts say that yellow perch can be found in the brackish tidal tributary rivers of the Chesapeake Bay, which include the Potomac, Rappahannock, Chickahominy, Nottoway, and New rivers. In addition, again according to DGIF, some of the best fishing can be found in Machodoc, Maddox, Aquia, and Occoquan creeks, Western Branch, Prince, Waller Mill, Little Creek, Holliday, Moomaw, and Claytor lakes. Another tip: The Northwest River in the Tidewater area is a less-pressured waterway that's known for citation-sized yellow perch. Wow, you have a lot of fantastic options to choose from!

So, as you can see, there's no better medicine for the winter-time angler's cabin fever than going outdoors and fishing for yellow perch. No excuses —just get out and give it a try! 🐟

Dr. Peter Brookes is a part-time, Virginia outdoor writer with a full-time job in Washington, D.C. in foreign policy. BrookesOutdoors@gmail.com

Check This Out: The Virginia Angler Recognition Program:

Sure, it's fun to catch yellow perch for the stringer or catch and release, but why not set your eyes on a trophy fish under the Virginia Angler Recognition Program (VARP) www.dgif.virginia.gov/fishing/trophy-fish.

According to DGIF, to qualify and receive recognition under VARP, you have to land a yellow perch of at least 1 pound 4 ounces in weight and 12 inches in length. The DGIF website will keep you up to date on when and where the biggest citation fish are caught. So far, the largest yellow perch caught was a 3 lb. female, full of eggs, having a huge girth of more than 13", measuring 16.5" in length. She was boated on March 8, 2010 by George L. Mullins of Haysi who was fishing a live minnow in Flannagan Reservoir. WOW! See if you can top this record! Good luck!



Soldier, Coach, and Mentor

Retired Marine's Dedication to Archery and Teaching Impacts Countless Kids



Story & photos by Ken Perrotte

The passage of 53 years had little effect on the delight betrayed by the eyes and smiles of both teacher and student. Indeed, it may have amplified the moment.

Roger Summers was a surprise guest as he joined the group of young archers readying their equipment at a weekly practice session of the King George Arrow Splitters 4-H Shooting Club. Summers walked over to retired Marine Corps Capt. Tom Breese, an Arrow Splitters coach. He smiled and said, "Remember me?"

Summers, age 65, was carrying an old recurve bow he bought from a Herter's catalog in one hand and a still shiny

trophy in the other. He told Breese, "You gave this to me. You were Sergeant Breese then."

Breese, a young Marine in 1966, back from a combat tour in Vietnam and stationed at Marine Corps Base Quantico, was an enthusiastic bowman. He and his sergeant major began shooting with the Lunga Archers, so named after the large reservoir on Quantico. "A number of youngsters were also shooting there at that time and that's where I developed an interest in coaching," Breese explained. "We had a lot of fun."

Summers' brief visit brought back "flooding memories," Breese said. "Roger, as I recall, was a really good kid."



Tom Breese took up archery as a young man.

Breese said the moment reinforced one of his philosophies. “You never know what kind of an impact you make until later on,” Breese said. “It’s great to see guys like Roger who remember and grew up with the ethic that this sport brings. It [archery] teaches life lessons.”

Breese, now 76, was born near Elmira, New York, not far from the Pennsylvania border, growing up in a family with four siblings. He and four other young men from his high school joined the Marine Corps in 1960 under the buddy system. Just 17 years old, he entered under the delayed enlistment plan.

His first assignment was to the Marine Barracks at Yorktown, Virginia. “That’s the first time I laid eyes on Virginia,” he said. He then deployed to Guantanamo Bay during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In Vietnam, he was an “S-2 scout” in an intelligence section. “My claim to fame was I could read maps and aerial photos, and build terrain models.”

He fondly recalls senior noncommissioned officers who mentored him and encouraged his progression. “Our



Roger Summers, right, holds the archery trophy that Tom Breese, center, awarded him 50 years ago. Club member, Colton Josselyn, left, enjoys hearing them reminisce.

sergeant major was a guy named Puckett and he sent me to every school he could think of,” Breese said.

His love of bows and arrows began as a preteen boy. “I had a friend named Eugene Campbell who was interested in archery. He had one of those old Shakespeare glass bows and a handful of dinged-up wooden arrows. We would travel with his dad to different places to shoot archery and Eugene and I would share the bow. That’s really how I got started,” Breese said.

Military duty caused starts and stops to his archery career. A second Vietnam tour intervened. Then, in 1969, when he was stationed at Marine Corps Air Station New River in North Carolina, he met Bob Mellon, a dedicated, competitive archer.

“Bob and I started shooting together, traveling up and down the East Coast on weekends for tournaments. I

was shooting an old Ben Pearson Pinto,” Breese said.

The two had considerable success in regional tournaments. Marine Corps headquarters heard about their archery exploits and decided to sponsor them as a team in the national championships, staged at Cobo Hall in Detroit. There, he laughs, they were both severely humbled. “By the end of the first day, I think I had about 1,000 people ahead of me. We finished somewhere in the top 500, but it was a wonderful experience. The people there helped a lot, we learned a great deal,” Breese said.

Birth of Belvoir Bowhunters

A third Vietnam tour followed by the pressures of assignments in New York and then a company command curtailed his shooting. It wasn’t until he retired from the Marines in 1984 that

Previous page: Tom Breese and his King George Arrow Splitters 4-H Club members pose for a photo at the archery range on Breese’s property.

his brother-in-law Ronny Shelton, encouraged him to get back into archery. They began hunting together and along with 23 other archers formed The Belvoir Bowhunters, still one of largest, most vibrant archery groups in Virginia, if not the nation.

Breese said he worked alongside other Belvoir Bowhunters for “a good 20 years” coaching hundreds of Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. “That’s where I really learned the coaching craft,” he said, adding he went to a couple schools to become a certified instructor by the National Field Archery Association and USA Archery.

Breese began his career in the enlisted ranks and retired at the rank of captain. Like many military retirees, he

began a second career, first as a plumber and then as a Fairfax County deputy sheriff. Upon retiring from Fairfax in 2003, he and his wife Sandy moved to King George County, settling on a 40-acre farm that offered a long-range view of the Rappahannock River. They called the place, “Lost Turtle Farm.”

“My interest when coming here was improving the habitat for the wildlife,” he said. He began thinning timber and replacing plant and tree species that weren’t beneficial to wildlife with species native to Virginia, such as Washington hawthorn, bald cypress and a variety of native oaks. He also created wildlife openings, planting native, warm-season grasses.

Today, the property abounds with the sights and sounds of a variety of birds

and wildlife, among them the beautiful call of the bobwhite quail.

“I’ve got at least two coveys of quail that live here,” he said with satisfaction.

Duty Calls, Again

Breese was reading a local weekly newspaper several years ago when he saw an article about the formation of a fledging 4-H archery club in King George. “I met with Todd Mrotek, who was running the club then. They were shooting at an indoor horse arena. That very evening, I began working on some of the kids’ equipment because it was a little out of shape,” Breese said.

The retired Marine went gung ho for the King George Arrow Splitters. He sought a grant through the National Rifle Association that help set up a portion of his farm as a range where the club could shoot. The range has top-quality



In 1969, Tom Breese continued his love of archery at the New River Marine Corps Air Station in North Carolina.



Tom Breese coaches a young member in shooting form.



Tom Breese shares a laugh with Anna Ackerman, left, and Lexi Loughner, center, the team's national competitors.

backstops and targets, including 3-D targets. The money has also let the club purchase some personal equipment for the archers. He still helps maintain many of the youngsters' gear, tweaking bows and repairing arrows.

"All of that would not have been possible without the NRA," Breese said. "Local businesses have been willing to help short term, but the NRA grants have been a real godsend."

He has worked with King George kids at all age levels, teaching archery fundamentals and then helping them formulate plans for how they might progress.

"The thing about coaching is that you not only try to develop a youngster within their particular sport, you also try to develop their character. Like many other sports, archery is a discipline. Overall, shooting form is probably the most important thing, but at the same time you have to realize everyone is built differently, does things differently. You have to take what the archer gives you and get the best out of them," Breese explained.

Once archers get the basics down, usually around the time they are intermediate shooters, archery becomes more of a mental game, Breese said. The youngsters understand they must take care of their equipment and physical conditioning to perform at top levels. Shooters need to enter competition believing they can perform well or even win, but they can't dwell on mistakes.

"You have to recover, learn from mistakes and move on," Breese said.

This aspect of competitive archery is where some of Breese's prized students speak the most highly of him.

The Arrow Splitters club has seen several regional and state champions in recent years. Two King George girls, Anna Ackerman and Lexi Loughner, qualified to shoot in the 4-H national championships in Nebraska last June. Their team finished 13th overall. In the more recent 2019 state championships, Loughner earned the title of champion.

Ackerman, 16, has been shooting since she was a young girl, joining the 4-H squad when she was 11. She calls

Breese, "definitely the best mentor I've ever had. He's really understanding and can tell if I'm getting irritated with how I'm shooting and helps me relax. He's really wise, knows what he's talking about. If you have any questions about archery go to him and he will help you."

Loughner, also 16, said, "It's crazy. I never thought I'd go from shooting in the yard a couple years ago to qualifying to shoot in the national championships." She credits much of her success to Breese.

Both girls receive a lot of coaching at home from their fathers, but said it helps to have an additional non-parent perspective.

"Honestly, it helps to have another coach besides my father because it's another viewpoint," Ackerman said. She explained that she, like many teens, sometimes tunes out her parents and having a knowledgeable coach like Breese helps some of lessons sink in. "You can't get coached by your parents all the time," Ackerman noted.

Loughner said Breese is superb at helping new shooters learn the

mechanics, honing their shooting form and then working them up to the more technical aspects, including the all-important “mental game” archers must master for consistency. “If I get down on myself, he’ll tell me to forget the last shot and keep going,” Loughner said.

Breese said having two of his King George proteges qualify to shoot in the 4-H national competition is a “dream come true. It thrills me to my core!” he said.

April Phillips, Loughner’s mother, praised Breese for his dedication to helping the kids.

“What I like about Tom is he is knowledgeable about all kinds of bows, compounds, barebows—stick and a string as he calls them,” she said. “He does so much for the 4-H club, opening up his home so they have a place to shoot.”

More Impact

The Arrow Splitters club isn’t solely focused on competition. Shelba Durham’s son Justin was born with Down Syndrome. Ainsley’s Angels is a nonprofit

organization seeking to build awareness about America’s special needs community through inclusion in all aspects of life. Fredericksburg ambassador Michele Tritt helped pair Justin with Breese and the Arrow Splitters

“From the first day, Tom included Justin in everything that represents Arrow Splitters. He jumped right in and loaned my son a bow and took time to teach Justin and myself the proper care, allowing us to possess the bow for as long as Justin needed,” Durham shared.

“Over time, Justin grew with the program and with that his confidence began to soar. He loves Tom and the other coaches because they are patient, yet firm. They treat him with compassion but never separate him from the group when it comes to expectations, allowing Justin to feel as typical as he might be able to. Without Tom working with our family and Justin, I am not sure he would have ever had this opportunity to be involved in a community program with typical peers. We are grateful for Tom’s dedication and sincere heart,” Durham added.

Breese shared a story about returning from Vietnam in his uniform. Military members were discouraged from traveling in their uniforms during those days. “A boy who lived across the street from my parents was playing in the street. I stopped and talked with him. I saw the same guy years later at Quantico. He was a Marine Corps staff sergeant. He told me I was the reason why he joined the Marine Corps. I never realized when I stopped and talked with him that day that I would make that kind of an impact on his life.

“All of us impact people in positive ways throughout our lives. Eventually, we run into somebody who says, ‘I want to be that guy,’ Breese said. “If I only had one student who looked at me and said, ‘I want to be that guy,’ it would be a great thing.” ✦

Ken Perrotte is a King George county resident and the outdoors columnist for Fredericksburg’s Free Lance-Star newspaper. Contact him at Kmunicate@gmail.com.



Tom Breese’s coaching skills are on target.



Tom Breese works with club members during a training session at the practice range he built.

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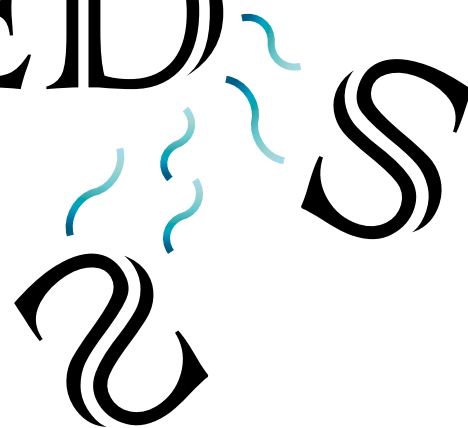
Meghan Marchetti / DGIF

Located in the far southeastern corner of Virginia in the city of Chesapeake, this management area is made up of two parcels, the 750-acre Dismal Swamp tract and 3,800-acre Cavalier tract. It is home to wildlife such as black bear, white-tailed deer, wild turkey, canebrake rattlesnakes, and neo-tropical migratory songbirds. Activities include bird watching, hiking, and photography. Hunting and trapping are allowed as well, but be sure to check regulations.

Searching for

SHEDS

By Gerald Almy



© Tommy Kirkland

The buck's long main beam and sweeping tines appeared to glow with their own inner light on that gray, rain-soaked day. Glassing carefully, I counted five points coming off the antlers. It was an amazing rack.

But there was something different about this encounter from any other whitetail hunting experiences I've had in Virginia. It happened in March. And instead of glassing two sides of a rack protruding from a buck's head, it was just one antler resting softly on a carpet of brown and tan oak leaves, left by a deer that no longer needed it.

Even though the buck no longer had a use for it, finding the shed antler brought a special joy to that late winter day. It said that this deer was still alive, walking these woods, and slowly starting the process of creating yet another set of antlers, ones that would most likely be larger and more impressive than the one I had just found.

If you're feeling a bit let down after the close of deer season, it's time to slip on your favorite hiking boots, grab a pair of binoculars, and go shed hunting. Searching for cast-off deer antlers offers the perfect transitional activity to keep you engaged with wildlife and the great outdoors between fall deer hunting and spring turkey, and fishing seasons. It will teach you a lot, like how do deer grow antlers in the first place?

Why Antlers Grow and Fall Off

Before it is born, a male deer will have formed two mounting points on the top of its skull called pedicels, a location for the outgrowth of frontal bone that eventually becomes antlers. Antlers start to grow from the tops of the pedicels in spring, and this growth is controlled by the photoperiod or day length which in turn controls testosterone levels. Starting with veins and arteries supplying nutrition, a protective skin called velvet forms over the emerging, living tissue that will

eventually turn into true bone. After several months of rapid growth, the antlers are fully developed. Around mid-summer increasing levels of testosterone triggered by the shortening day length causes the antlers to begin to ossify and turn into bone, which eventually cuts off the blood flow to the velvet. In Virginia, most bucks shed their velvet and molt to their winter coat between August 15 and September 15. The bucks are now ready for breeding season, the rut. At the end of the rut, a drop in testosterone levels causes weakness in the bone at the top of the pedicels thus causing the antlers to fall off anywhere, and anytime.

When to Look

Most deer in Virginia cast off their antlers sometime between January and March, though February and March are the prime months for "shedding." But don't wait too long because there are others searching for those antlers as well! Antlers are a great source of calcium and

Above: A buck has dropped or shed one of his antlers. Right: A shed can reveal many secrets about the daily life of bucks in the area.



phosphorous, which is a huge draw for many small mammals. If you wait too long, squirrels, chipmunks, groundhogs, and mice may gnaw away at the sheds damaging them. Start your search early if you want pristine antlers!

Why Should I Hunt for Sheds?

Hunting sheds offers wonderful opportunities to get outdoors for some fresh air and exercise! For one, it is a great excuse to invite family and friends out for a friendly shed “treasure” hunt. Even the family dog can join in.

Besides looking for antlers, you could also be scouring the woods for signs, especially if getting ready for the upcoming spring gobbler season. Be on the lookout for their distinctive droppings and scrapes.

If deer hunting is your focus, look for rubs, scrapes, tracks, droppings, and natural travel funnels. Also, take note of prime feeding and bedding areas. Information of this type can be invaluable for the next fall hunting season.

You could find a shed anywhere in a buck's home range. But odds are good that 90 percent or more of the antlers you discover are going to be found in one of three locations: bedding areas, transition corridors, and feeding areas. Identifying and recording which of these areas you find a shed will help you formulate your fall hunting strategy.

Discovering Bedding Areas

Unless the shed is in a feeding area or along a travel route, chances are good you've found part of that deer's core bedding territory. The thickest, most remote areas are the ones dominant, older bucks will claim. Overgrown swamps, conifer stands that block the wind and provide thermal protection, saddles in ridges, brushy hollows, creek bottoms, benches just down from ridges, and growing-back clear-cuts are the places to look for sheds left by bedding bucks. These are often the same spots that serve as escape areas for bucks if you hunt in high-pressure situations. Any time other than the rut, these are prime stand locations.



Left: Protective velvet nourishes growing antlers and once full size is obtained, right, the protective velvet dies and is rubbed off revealing hard antlers ready for the rut.

Both by © Ryan Yoder Images



Left: Dying velvet dries up and is rubbed away revealing, right: new, blood-stained antlers.

Both by © Tes Randle Jolly



Once an antler has dropped off the pedicle, it heals over and the process begins again.



The author holds an amazing pair of sheds found walking the mountains near his home. Want to bet he's thinking about that buck for next hunting season?

Finding Transition Routes

If you find a good shed and it's not in a thick, jumbled or remote bedding type cover, chances are it's on a transition route the deer uses from that daytime bedding cover to evening or nighttime feed areas. This is also a valuable discovery and can be a prime fall stand site. Try to locate funnels or pinch points along these routes such as strips of timber between fields, saddles, or narrow stream bottoms. Using topo maps and aerial photos, unravel where that deer was moving from and where it was heading.

Locating Feeding Fields

When you locate a shed along a transition corridor, start looking downhill from there or toward more open fields and try to predict where the animal was heading to feed. This might be an acorn flat, orchard, area with herbaceous plants and browse, agricultural field, or food plot. Identifying that destination can help further in formulating your fall hunting plans. And chances are good you'll find more sheds at the actual feeding site.

Record What You Find

To get the most out of shed hunting, keep thorough records of what you find on your forays. In a notebook, write down the antler's circumference measurements, beam length, the number of points and age estimate, and take a photo. Record its location or mark it on a topographic map or sketch of the property so you have the exact spot pinpointed.

All of this can then be scoured over and analyzed before next fall to help you decide which bucks to pass on for another year or two, which ones to try for, and where the best ambush spot is to accomplish that goal.

Searching Tactics

The best method I've found for successful shed hunting is to try to work methodically in a grid pattern as you walk through the woods. That way you don't overlook any habitat. Look for antler tines jutting up, the graceful curl of a buck's main beam, or sun glinting off a rack.

Work parallel, walking along side hills or benches. Then move up 30-80 yards and work back the opposite direction.

If you work “up and down” you’ll waste a lot of energy. Years of grouse hunting in Virginia’s mountains taught me that! Also consider re-working through areas that look especially good or have produced sheds in the past. Approaching from a different angle may make the antler stand out more.

“Drives” are also a fun way to discover sheds. This method can be used when friends and/or relatives work as a team as if you were conducting a deer drive during hunting season. Your “treasure hunt” now becomes a social event, and everyone can share in the excitement when a shed is found.

Also consider bringing along the family pet—canines, not cats! Most dogs will enjoy the exercise and many become quite skilled at the activity with minimal training time. Just let him know you get the sheds, not him.

Other Productive Spots

Good spots to search for sheds include heavy cover near food plots, agricultural fields, swamps, conifer stands, brush-choked hollows, saddles in ridges, benches, draws, creek bottoms, and islands in rivers. Sometimes you’ll find sheds in cover so thick you can barely walk through it. Other times you’ll locate them easily in open feeding areas where the animals probably dropped them at night.

Areas that have been burned recently are great since the sheds literally jump out at you against the blackened background. South and southwest facing slopes are often productive since bucks like to soak up the rays of afternoon sun there.

You want to cover lots of ground, but this isn’t a race. It’s not how fast you walk, but how carefully you scour the ground.

If you find one antler, search hard in the immediate area and you may find its match, but not necessarily. I’ve found one side of a rack and then discovered the other match days later and a mile away.

If you can, hunt during a light rain or on cloudy days. The antlers show up better then. When searching during bright, clear weather, keep the sun at your back and wear polarizing sunglasses.

What to Bring on a Shed Hunt

Three items I bring on every shed hunt are a walking stick, large daypack, and binoculars. A walking stick is self-explanatory. A day pack will give you something to carry water, snacks, and your found sheds. Binoculars let you quickly check out objects you see at a distance that might be sheds. More than once, these “objects” have turned out to be the best shed of the day.

It’s important to keep your hopes in check when you hunt for sheds. Don’t anticipate finding an arm full of antlers. If you pick up two or three on a half-day outing, consider it a successful shed hunting expedition. Once you find your first deer antler, though, chances are you’ll make shed hunting a regular part of your outdoor activities to fill that “gap” between fall hunting and spring turkey and fishing seasons. Happy Hunting! 🦌

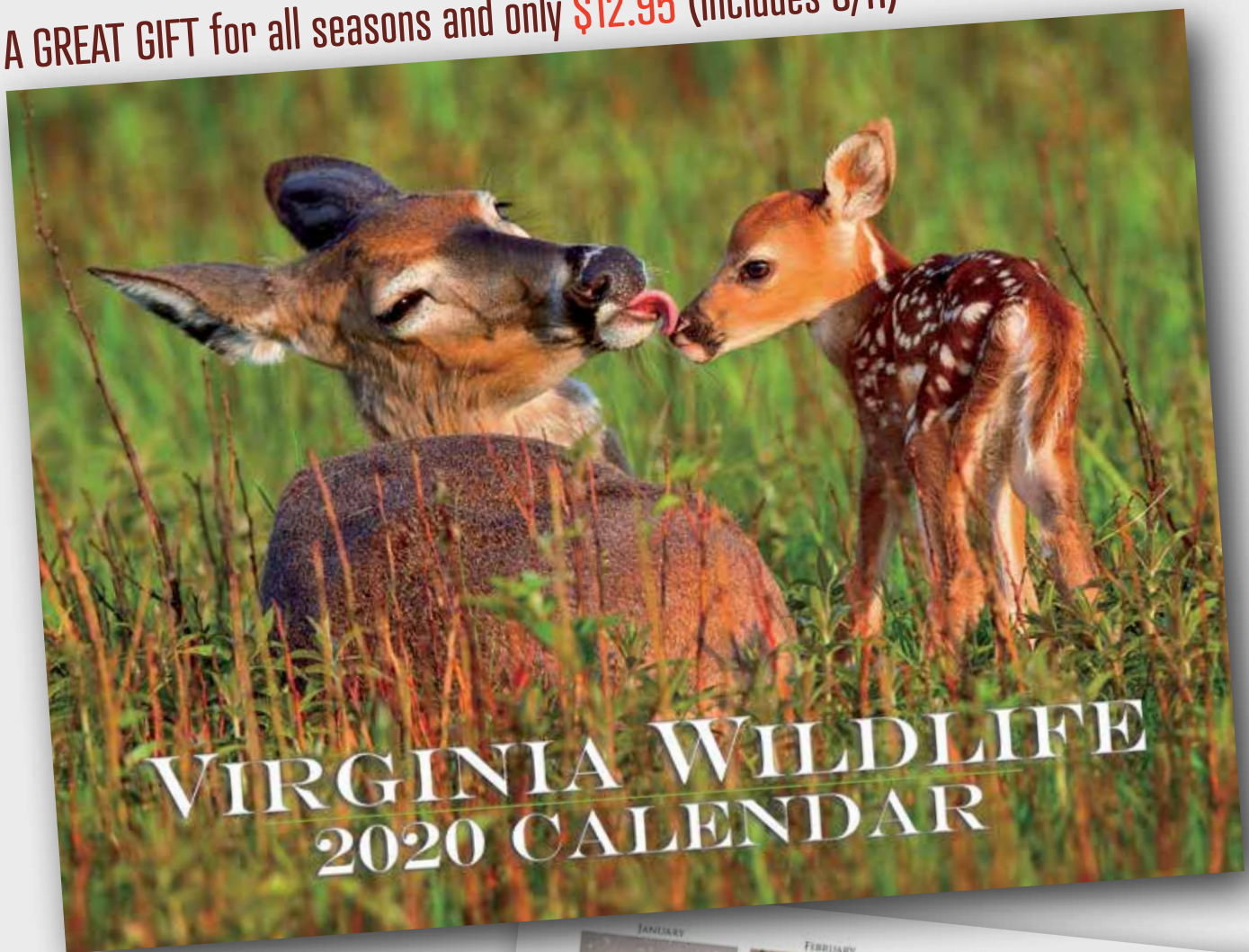
Gerald Almy lives in the Shenandoah Valley but travels widely for his work as a fulltime outdoor writer. He is currently a columnist for Sports Afield and a contributing editor for Field & Stream.



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Brian Moyer / DGIF

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Tie One Off This Winter

By James Walton • Photos by Lynda Richardson

To this day when I see a fly tying vise and tight black thread wrapping onto a size 10 hook it's hard not to envision the chill of winter and an old man with a clipped mustache. Maybe he is wearing a nice wide-brimmed hat and those specs that are shaped like a half moon. Outside the window of his log cabin home are mountains. They were giant, rocky, snowcapped mountains. The cabin would be nestled in a valley on a trout stream filled with trophy fish. There would be a fire crackling in the fireplace.

That's the idyllic scene everyone imagines, but that wasn't my reality. Growing up in a row house in the suburbs of Philadelphia, during the winter months I would work tirelessly tying flies while crammed into our small back room.

The book, "Fly Patterns for Trout", would be opened before me with a half-tied fly resting in the vise. Most likely, I would still be in pajamas late into the day, my hair a mess. There were no mountains outside my window. All you could see were the adjacent brick row homes, and if you wanted, you could look right into the windows of strangers. There was no valley and our trout streams were stocked.

During this time in my life, my father would keep a running countdown until opening day of trout season. It wouldn't be uncommon for dad to sit down on the couch after work and say something

to the effect of "We only got a few weeks now. I can't wait."

Since winter was tough where we lived my dad and I would use the time to tie flies. The image of my first woolly bugger is a vivid one. It was an olive woolly with mottled hackles. I tied it under the watchful eye

and had a great fly tying desk and swaths of materials. He had deer hair of every color, dubbings, hackles, marabou, foam, twine, peacock herl, and much more. Along with the materials, he also had an extensive library on fly tying.

Some days I'd be in front of the vise for hours. It wasn't merely the depth in available patterns and materials that kept me glued to the vise. It was also the desire to please my dad, to impress him beyond his wildest imagination. "Could I tie the fly that would catch all the fish this weekend? The fly we would talk about the whole ride home?"

So, what really drove me was that whatever I tied that week would wind up in the water that weekend. Dad would tie one on, and I would tie on another. I used to think there was no greater satisfaction in all of angling than to catch a fish on the fly you tied yourself. Now, as a father of two boys, I understand there is one; if that fly was tied by your son.

As an 8 year-old, my dad would take me to a stand-alone Orvis Store in

Media, Pennsylvania. Now, this was not the Orvis store of today. There were no fancy button downs, slip-on shoes, or dog life vests at this location. Walking through the door you were assaulted by a powerful smell of old wooden shelves and hackles. I could never understand

of my dad in that small back room. The tail was too short and there was hardly enough room to tie the fly off. But that first woolly bugger sparked a fire in me that was unquenchable. You see, my dad tied flies



Dad with big rainbows!



To this day, the author still works in a cramped back room tying flies with just as much enthusiasm for the art as when he first started.

how a fly fishing store like this stayed open. We were almost always the only people in there.

The back wall was filled with materials and tools for tying flies and it was overwhelming to step into the fly tying section of a store. There are bobbins, bodkins, whip finishes, hair stackers, half hitch tools, and bobbin threaders. That's not even getting into the vast array of materials that also studded this back wall such as hair, fur, feathers, beads, cones, eyes, dubbing, chenille, thread and wire. And, of course, you also need a vise to hold your fly in place where everything comes together on one hook.

You could argue that the whole of fly fishing is very fulfilling. From assembling the gear to tying the knots to unfurling that perfect cast. Still, that singular moment as the water slowly floats your

homemade dry fly down stream and your unwavering patience is rewarded by the snapping sip of a trout, in my book, corners the market on fulfillment.

This winter I want you to investigate investing some time and money into becoming a fly tyer. There aren't many states where you can conveniently fly fish for the variety of fresh and saltwater species than you can in Virginia. This equates to a powerful and diverse tying opportunity. Virginia is undoubtedly a fly fisherman's paradise and to really own the experience I invite you to spend some time behind the vise this winter. Good luck! 🍷

James Walton of Richmond, is a freelance writer and first time contributor to this magazine.



MY FAVORITE PATTERNS FOR FISHING VIRGINIA WATERS

The following patterns are very simple and great for beginners. These patterns require minimal materials and skills so give one a try!

Trout (Spring, fall, mid-winter)
Olive Grizzly Woolly Bugger

Shad (mid-March to early May)
Red/Gold Shad Dart

Largemouth Bass (June - September)
Sneaky Pete Popper

Smallmouth Bass (Year Round)
Rabbit Strip Leech

The Olive Grizzly Woolly Bugger is the first fly I ever tied! Our step-by-step instructions for tying this fly are on pages 30-34.

Getting Started

I would recommend the following tools to start:

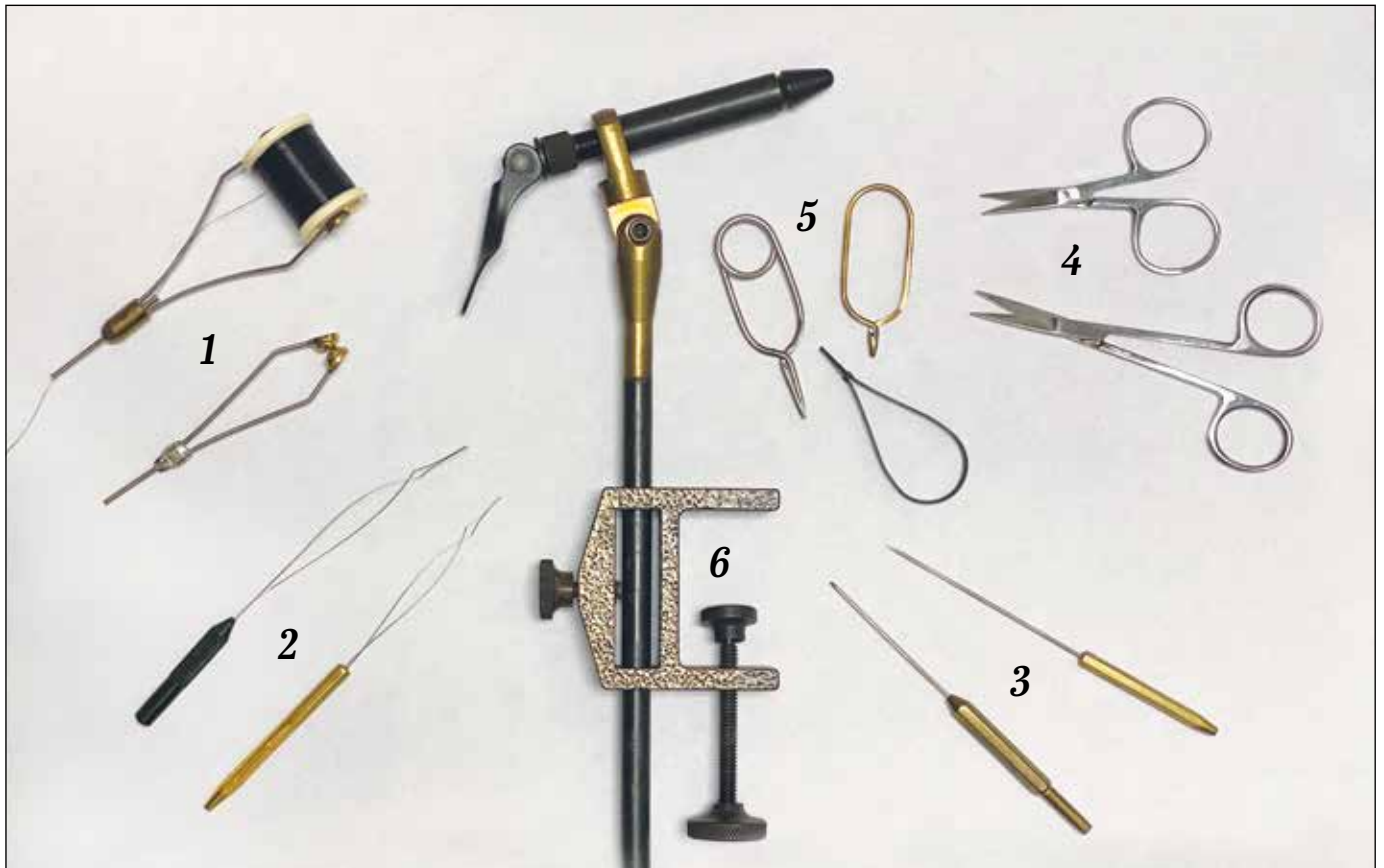
- 1) Bobbin
- 2) Bobbin Threaders (It saves you lots of headaches)
- 3) Bodkin
- 4) Good Fly Tying Scissors
- 5) Hackle Pliers
- 6) Vise



Olive Grizzly Woolly Bugger tied by author.

The vise attaches to your fly tying bench and holds your hook in place while you work your magic. Now, like everything, there is a vast array of fly tying vises that range in price. Some can really break the bank. I am going to be straight with you here. Get something cheap or second hand if you are a beginner. If it holds the hook tight that's all you need to start.

Another great option is to buy a starter kit. Many fly shops now offer starter fly tying kits. These come with a vise, basic tools, some materials, and probably a few patterns to practice, as well. It's as good a start as any. Remember, you are trying this out. So, don't go overboard and find out fly tying is not for you.



TROUT (Spring, fall, mid-winter, check regulations)

Olive Grizzly Woolly Bugger

Materials:

- Size 12 Hook
- Black Thread
- Lead-free round wire .015
- Olive Marabou
- Olive Chenille
- Grizzly Hackle
- Peacock Herl
- Head cement



This basic kit was used to complete the olive grizzly woolly bugger seen in vise.



Process:

- 1) Secure your hook in the vise like this!
- 2) Using a black threaded bobbin, start running thread from a little below the eye of the hook to the bend in the hook.
- 3) Do this several times. Leave the bobbin hanging.

Continued next page...



4) Now add a few wraps of lead-free wire to weight the center of the hook.



5) Continue to cover the lead-free wire by wrapping thread up and down the hook again. When done, you should have your thread positioned near the bend of the hook for the next step which is tying on the tail.



6) Add a piece of marabou about the length of the hook (You can trim off what you don't want later) and place it just above the bend in the hook.



7) Tie to secure marabou with a few wraps of thread.

8



8) Cut about three inches of olive chenille. Add the chenille above the bend in the hook and secure with a few wraps of thread. Leave most of the chenille hanging down for tying additional materials.

9



9) Pull two peacock herl from packet and add it where you started with the chenille. Wrap with thread to secure.

10



10) Pull out a nice long grizzly hackle. Attach it to the same location as the peacock herl with the tip pointing toward eye of the hook. Secure the tip with a few thread wraps.

11



11) Now bring up the dangling piece of chenille and wrap it up toward the eye of the hook. Follow with a thread wrap to the eye to hold chenille in place. Cut the excess chenille off with fly tying scissors but DO NOT cut thread!



12) Now for the tricky parts! Remember those two peacock herls? Pick both of them up and wind around the hook up to the eye. Pull the excess forward so your fly now looks like it has antennae.



13) Your last wrap will be the grizzly hackle! Grab the hackle, fluff it up a bit and pull it forward as you did the peacock herl and start wrapping it around the hook making sure that you are able to create a fluffy presentation.



14) Clip off the excess hackle and thread wrap the end to secure it. You can now create a simple head just below the eye of the hook. Wrap enough thread to create a nice black head.



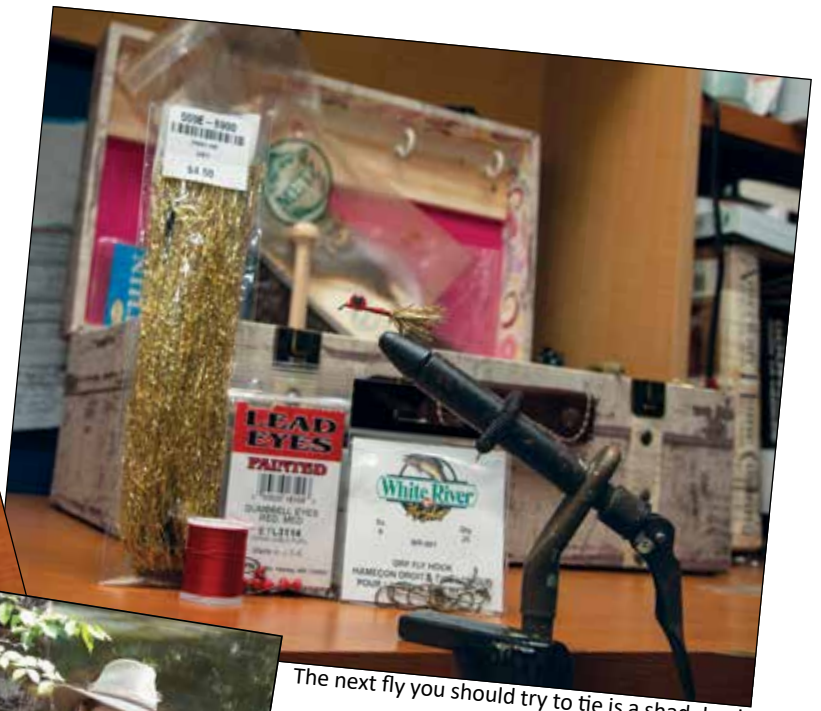
15) Using your bodkin, or your finger, you can tie the fly off with a few simple knots below the eye. Clip the thread and add a little cement to the head to finish it off. Trim marabou and grizzly with scissors if needed.

Congratulations! You have just tied your first fly!





The author's father kept a journal of every fishing trip they ever made together, a lovely reminder of shared trips and flies.



The next fly you should try to tie is a shad dart!



The author with a couple of nice rainbow trout.

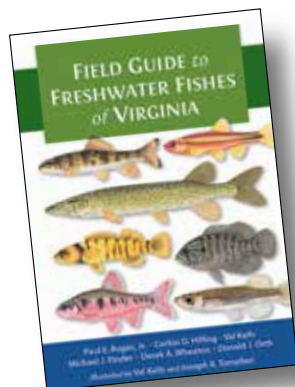
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OUT & ABOUT



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By Bugas, Hilling, Kells, Pinder, Wheaton, Orth

Illustrations by Val Kells and Joseph R. Tomelleri

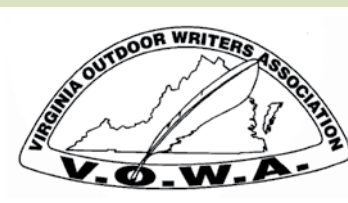
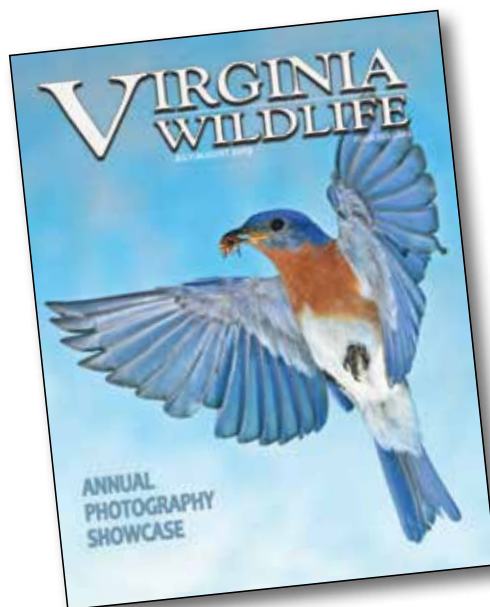
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"The Inland waters of Virginia support an incredible diversity of freshwater fishes. Some are large and well-known, such as the bass and trout that are pursued by anglers for sport and food. Many are neither big nor flashy but have interesting habits. Freshwater fishes are just a stream, river, or lake away. We hope by using this guide the reader develops a greater understanding and appreciation for this remarkable group of Virginia's wildlife." – The Authors

This new field guide might well be the most comprehensive and useful reference work on our Commonwealth's freshwater fishes to date. Scholarly yet accessible, the material in this colorful volume is based upon the enthusiasm and expertise of some of the most respected scientists, academics, and artists in the field of marine science. Three of the authors are associated with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.

From the Appalachian plateau to the coastal plain, a combination of suitable climates, unique geological and topographic characteristics, varied stream types, and the interconnectedness of our river systems are responsible for the diversity of fish species found in our state. The lavish illustrations, maps, and infographics in this conveniently sized volume make the task of identifying these fish an enjoyable one. After all, if a guide is too cumbersome or difficult to use in the field, it defeats the purpose. In addition, the authors include an introduction to the world of fish identification by familiarizing the reader with scientific terms and anatomical descriptions.

The authors cover a range of topics that will interest the freshwater angler: the niche sport of micro-fishing, fish keeping tips for the home aquarium, fish photography advice, and a section on fish management and conservation. There is also a helpful glossary, and an index of both common and scientific names. Highly recommended.



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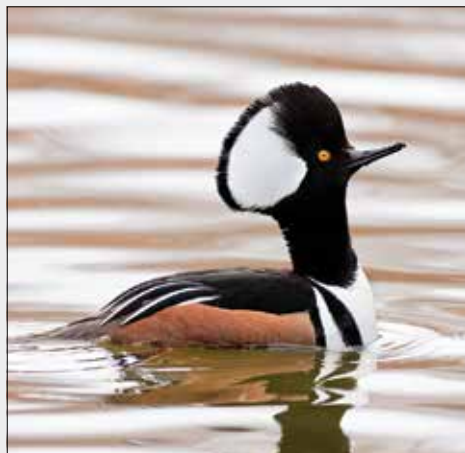


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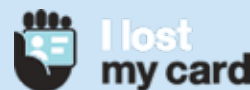


Wade Truong is a lifelong, Virginian, self-taught chef, and hunter. His work has been featured in The New York Times and Garden & Gun. His passion for cooking and sharing food is the foundation of his obsession with the outdoors and the resources they provide. He spends all of his free time hunting, fishing, foraging, and exploring the bounty of the land and water. He believes that the more we participate with our environment, the more we understand that we need to protect it.

To learn more about Wade and his recipe adventures go to: www.elevatedwild.com

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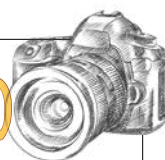
FEBRUARY 8, 2020

For more information:

www.dgif.virginia.gov/events



PICS FROM THE FIELD



Congratulations to **Janet Hauser** of Lanexa for sending in her image of a European hornet dining on sap oozing from an oak tree. Janet captured the moment with a Nikon D3300 DSLR camera, Nikkor 55-200mm f/4-5.6 lens, ISO 1100, 1/500, f/5.6.

You are invited to submit up to five of your best photographs for possible publication in *Pics from the Field*. Please include contact information and send only high-resolution (300ppi, 8X10 min size) jpeg, tiff, or raw files on a CD, DVD, or flash drive and mail to: Pics from the Field, *Virginia Wildlife* magazine, P.O. Box 90778, Henrico, VA 23228-0778.

We look forward to seeing and sharing your best work!

Due a Tax Refund?

Please consider supporting essential research and management of Virginia's native birds, fishes, and nongame animals.



If you are due a tax refund from the Commonwealth of Virginia, simply mark the appropriate place on this year's tax checkoff on the Virginia State Income Tax form.

To make a cash donation directly to the Nongame Program, visit the Department's website or mail a check made

payable to Virginia Nongame Program. Send to: DGIF Nongame Program, P.O. Box 90778, Henrico, VA 23228-0778.



12th Annual
Virginia NASP
State Tournament

MARCH 14, 2020

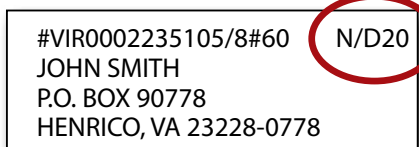
←
Meadow Event Park, Doswell, Va.

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NEW STATE **SALAMANDER** is now a WILDLIFE CONSERVATION PLATE!

In 2015, the dredging of a Fairfax County lake prompted a movement by area students to save the vernal pools and salamanders that lived in the area. Speaking at local government meetings to lobby for their cause eventually turned into the Salamander Savers 4-H Club of Fairfax County.

Tireless in their cause, these 11 young naturalists eventually inspired a house bill that, in 2018, made the red salamander Virginia's State Salamander. This honorable designation was made possible through a collaborative effort between the Salamander Savers 4-H Club, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, and Delegate Eileen Filler-Corn of Fairfax County.

Del. Eileen Filler-Corn said she was really impressed with the Salamander Savers. "They started and founded the organization, did their research, wanted to be involved in the process, and were dedicated to see it through to the end," she said.

The red salamander, (*Pseudotriton ruber*), was selected for its beautiful coloration, widespread distribution throughout Virginia, and its ability to raise awareness about an animal whose secret life is rarely observed or appreciated by most people.

This year, the momentum continues and the red salamander is again being honored as a new state license plate!

Funds from the plates will go to the DGIF General Wildlife Fund and will help support the agency's work for wildlife and habitat.

So, what do you say? Want to support a great cause started by kids with a vision? Then, purchase your red salamander wildlife conservation license plate today!

Go to: www.dmv.virginia.gov/vehicles/#splates/category.asp?category=s

CONSERVATION AT WORK

By Ron Messina
Photos by Meghan Marchetti

Working for the DGIF is more a calling than a job.

One of the greatest things about working for Virginia's wildlife agency is the passion and commitment shared by those who are drawn to a career at Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. Individuals possessing different talents and diverse backgrounds not only perform work that is varied and challenging but also all join together to share one mission.

Whether it be working to capture ducks in a swamp at midnight, assisting hunters and fishermen, or greeting visitors to the front desk at head quarters, we all love what we do. At DGIF, we consider ourselves to be a family.

We thought you would like to meet some of our DGIF family and share in their passions both at work and outside of the office. Conservation at Work will feature them in Virginia Wildlife magazine, Notes from the Field, and our blog. For more, go to www.dgif.virginia.gov/atwork. We hope you enjoy meeting the faces of DGIF.

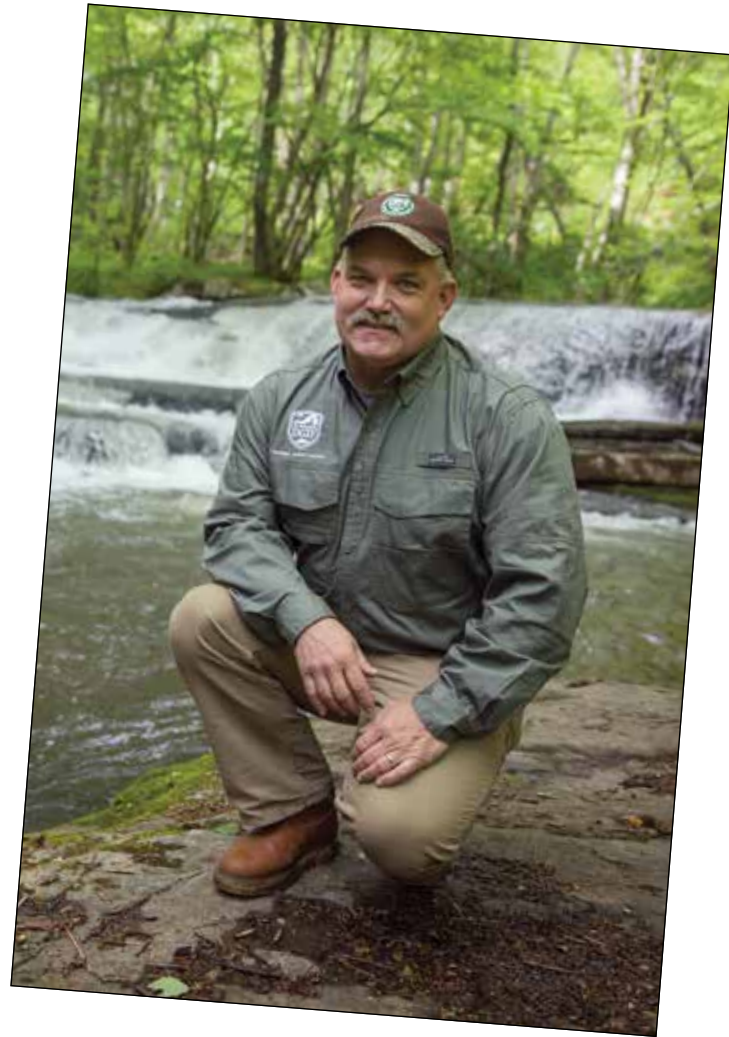
Tom Hampton

Lands & Facilities Manager

Hunting, fishing, trapping, and boating in particular, have been a big part of my life for as long as I can remember. I grew up in a small town in Wise County in the coalfields of Southwest Virginia. My earliest memory of an encounter with wildlife was catching crawdads in a creek that flowed by our home. From the time I was a teenager, I knew I wanted to work with fish and wildlife. My experiences in the outdoors enriched my life so much that I wanted to be a part of the "bigger picture." I wanted to work in conservation to enhance opportunities for people to experience wildlife and the outdoors.

After receiving a master's degree in Fisheries and Wildlife at Virginia Tech, I landed a job at DGIF where I'm the Lands and Facilities Manager in Southwest Virginia. One of the things I like most about my job is the tangibility of the work. It is wonderful to get to the end of a project and be able to see the results of your labor in the form of enhanced wildlife habitats or new and improved public access, especially in an area of the state that supports a rich diversity of plants, animals and natural resources. I believe wildlife adds great value to the human existence. I go to work each day with the goal of improving opportunities for folks to enjoy wildlife and boating.

One of the greatest thrills of my career is working with elk. I was fortunate enough to be part of the initial planning,





trapping, disease testing, transport, and restoration of elk from Kentucky to Buchanan County. Elk are magnificent animals. All the dedicated people we worked so hard with on the elk restoration project remain good friends.

I want people to know that I recognize what a blessing it is to work in conservation at DGIF. We are the designated keepers of wildlife, and in many cases, wild places in Virginia. I also want people to know that we are open to suggestions for ways to improve what we do. We may not be able to accomplish everything you suggest, because we work under the very real constraints of time, budget, regulations and sometimes politics. But, we are always willing to listen to suggestions, questions and concerns.

For the accompanying video go to: <https://youtu.be/OQ7pWJzeizo>



Lynda Richardson / DGIF



Jones and I had just returned from a driven pheasant shoot. At this shoot, we were asked to share a peg with another gun because the gun's shooting partner had failed to show. Of course, Ol' Jones had agreed to this arrangement because he would receive a huge discount for sharing a peg instead of shooting his own peg. Unfortunately, Jones made this deal before seeing who or what he was being paired with. Turns out his shooting partner for the day had a name that ended with the Roman numerals IV, a Boston accent, an aloof personality, and a young bruiser of a Lab with a Ph.D. in Attitude.

I could see Ol' Jones attempt to start things off on the right foot as the two men walked to the first peg. All it took was one question and a constant volcanic verbiage erupted from Mr. IV—as if he wanted as many people as possible to hear what he had to say. Turns out he only shoots English-made shotguns (Jones shoots a battered, briar-scarred Browning). He also had shot at some of the finest English estates and had purchased his young Lab, Wellington Longshanks Shropshire of Devon, from a breeder in England, boasting that he had trained the Lab himself.

Both Jones and I could see this was going to be an unusual day with a high probability of heading south quickly.

It started with the first drive.

Whenever a pheasant came close to our peg, Mr. IV would declare, "I'll take him!" and blast away. It did not matter if Mr. IV connected or not. Good ol' "Shrop", not being steady to shot, would break into the high grass looking for Mr. IV's pheasant. I will give that dog credit—he did have drive—he never thought of stopping to scent a bird until he was 75-80 yards out, running over a number of birds in the process. It did not take long for Ol' Jones and I to see that Shrop needed some hand signals or directional guidance from his owner. However, the poor lost soul was ignored because as long as birds were flying Mr. IV blasted away, simultaneously blowing a call whistle to bring the dog in, while pheasant were raining down all around him.

Although Shrop was supposed to have a pedigree that went back to some English Field Trail Champion in 1984, the dog's genetic sense of smell must have been lost in the late 1990s. It was only when one of Mr. IV's pheasants would land either on or directly in front of Shrop that he would then pick up a bird. There was no doubt however, when he found his quarry, because a loud crunching noise would emanate from the thick cover, followed by a continuous crunching noise—like someone walking on snow crust coming towards you. For the entire drive there would be a cacophony of BANG BANG! TWEET

TWEET! CRUNCH CRUNCH! OVER HERE OVER HERE! TWEET TWEET! CRUNCH CRUNCH! GET IN HERE!!! Upon his arrival back to the peg, Shrop would spit out a mangled mess of feather, flesh, and dog drool. I had never seen a more unappetizing game bird in my life! (And Labradors are not known as fastidious eaters.)

All of this commotion had an unsettling effect on Ol' Jones, as well as the remaining driven pheasants which, despite their brain size, instinctively knew not to fly anywhere near our peg. Fearing that the other members of the shooting party would think Ol' Jones had some hand in the commotion, Jones quietly stepped back, unloaded his gun, and placed it in its gun sleeve. He then attached my leash to my collar and patiently waited for the drive to end.

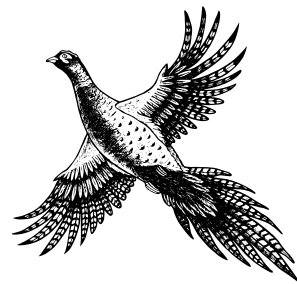
As a horn sounded, ending the first drive, an agitated shoot manager and two of his underkeepers pulled up in a SUV, took one look at Mr. IV, the pile of empty shells, the mass of chewed pheasant carcasses surrounding him, plus a Lab wandering aimlessly in the field, then promptly escorted Mr. IV and his dog off the premises.

"It is a shame that a dog with poor training can develop a hard mouth," remarked Ol' Jones.

"It is a shame that a man with poor training can develop a loud mouth," I countered.

Keep a leg up,
Luke

Luke spent many sunrises hunting up good stories with Clarke C. Jones, and thankfully, left us a cache of colorful tales. You can learn more about Clarke and Luke at www.clarkecjones.com.





A Walk in the Woods

Column and photograph by Mike Roberts

There are days in the dead of winter when relaxing in an easy chair seems like the right thing to do. The sound of firewood popping and cracking in the fireplace provides a level of reassurance regarding such decisions. Gray skies, frigid temperatures, and snow driven by northeasterly winds suggest a good book and a therapeutic cup of hot chocolate the better alternative – even for the hardest of souls.

Nevertheless, for those who appreciate the great outdoors, such days offer fantastic opportunities for watching birds at the backyard feeder. Cold weather increases their metabolism so obtaining energy-rich food becomes a priority. What's more, overcast skies and snow seem to enhance feather color, which makes observation that much more delightful.

One species sure to brave these inclement conditions is the handsome and often maligned blue jay. Many individuals who feed birds disdain this intelligent creature because of its aggressive nature. With the number of birds concentrated at wintertime feeding stations, manners are not part of the equation; it's all about survival of the fittest. But, like it or not, the blue jay sits atop the "pecking" order, literally, unless a Cooper's hawk interrupts the dinner party.

In his monumental effort to create a system for naming all living organisms (binomial nomenclature), Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus made a few critical errors. But when it came to the blue jay, his applied terminology was extremely accurate; *Cyanocitta cristata* is Latin for "a blue bird that chatters and is crested." Ironically, the blue jay's cyan-colored feathers are, in reality, black. The blue coloration is due to the feather's pigment, melanin. In an abbreviated explanation, this black, base layer absorbs the full color spectrum of light – except blue, which is refracted back to our eyes. Thus, the jay's black feathers appear blue.

Easy to identify, the back of this robin-sized member of the crow family features several shades of blue, with contrasting white and gray underparts, and its blue tail feathers



are decorated with narrow, black bands. Secondary wing feathers are a dazzling, brilliant blue tipped with white. The jay's key identification markings include a distinctive crest bordered by a wide, black collar; and prominent, white wing-bars. This passerine has a white face, black facial stripes, and black necklace. Sexes appear similar.

Blue jays are opportunistic feeders. During the summer they consume insects and soft mast, such as wild cherries, service berries, sassafras berries, blackberries, mulberries, and wild grapes. In addition, jays have been observed robbing eggs from the nests of other

birds. Come autumn, they flock to the bounty of hard mast – especially white oak acorns and beechnuts. Behaviorally caching or burying a portion of these nuts for leaner times, some of their stash is never recovered and simply sprout into seedlings. This is one of nature's methods of reclaiming hardwood forestlands.

While some observers are quick to condemn the blue jay for its belligerence and occasional meal of bird eggs (and perhaps a nestling or two), its keen sense of awareness is often beneficial to the entire community of songbirds. If a hawk, owl, or snake is spotted, the jays' raucous calls sound an alarm. Whenever observing bird activity at your feeders, take notice of visiting birds when a jay calls out loudly. They usually flush and take cover. Also worthy of mention, blue jays have the uncanny ability to mimic the red-shouldered hawk's cries – to the point of making it practically impossible to determine the imposter. Who knows why? It could be the mischievous blue jay's way of fretting its woodland neighbors, including the hawks!

Despite harsh, cold weather, flocks of blue jays continue singing their winter song – a welcomed refrain on those days when one can only dream of going for a walk in the woods.

Jeers and cheers for the handsome blue jay!

A lifelong naturalist and accomplished wildlife photographer, Mike Roberts enjoys sharing his knowledge and photographs with others. You can contact him at: return2nature@aol.com.



PHOTO TIPS

Column and photograph by Lynda Richardson

Become a Wildlife Photo Junkie!

I admit it. I am a wildlife photo junkie. I should probably be in a 12-step program I'm so bad. I constantly scour books, magazines, and the internet for the most exciting and evocative wildlife images I can find. I just can't help it!

I am no stranger to the National Geographic photography website and some of my best "fixes" come from checking in on annual winners of the National Wildlife's photo contest, Nature's Best Photography competition, Smithsonian photo contest, and the Natural History Museum of London's Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition.

Why am I so addicted? Because I love seeing incredible images. They inspire me to what's possible and give me ideas for improving my own work. When I first started out as a wildlife photographer I was pretty impressed with some of the photographs I took. As I became more and more experienced I realized just how basic those first photographs were. I didn't want basic. I wanted breathtaking images that no one else in the world had ever seen! So, I decided to study the amazing images of other photographers and learn from their successes to create my own.

But what is a great photograph? My first thought is something that makes me yell out loud, "WOW...that is insane!!! What an AWESOME IMAGE! How did they get THAT?" And then, I want to share it with someone and talk about it.

A "WOW" photo is usually something that I've never seen before. (And I've looked at thousands upon thousands of wildlife images from all over the world.) It may be an amazing behavior captured for the first time. It may be



Inspired by the outstanding remote camera work of several photographers, I was able to capture this image of a flycatcher getting ready to feed its young in an abandoned house.

a shot using unusual lighting, crazy camera angles, remote cameras, stunning composition, and/or created after years of planning, dangerous conditions, unbearable weather and a little bit of luck. But whatever it is, it originally started out as an idea in the photographer's head.

Try to think about an image you've never seen before related to your own work. How can you create an awesome photograph from this subject matter? Would different angles, lighting, remotes, or using a different lens work? Try it!

One of the best ways for me to get ideas is to look at others' work so I suggest you do the same. Become a wildlife photo junkie! Here's how to start: Pick your favorite subject and then, "Google" it to see what comes up in "Images." Not all of these photos will be great but you will see some good ones and find leads to even better ones. Study them. What

can you learn from these images that you can bring into your own work and how can you make it happen? Don't be afraid to experiment and see what works and doesn't work!

By looking at some of the best images in the world you can improve your photography but I will warn you... It is VERY habit forming. Happy Shooting!

A former career wildlife photojournalist for more than 30 years, Lynda Richardson is the art director for this magazine and a recovering wildlife photography junkie.



RESOURCES

- www.nationalgeographic.com/photography.com
- www.naturesbestphotography.com
- www.nwf.org/photocontest
- www.smithsonianmag.com/photocontest
- www.nhm.ac.uk/visit/wpy.html



LET'S GROW Native

Column by Carol A. Heiser



© Todd Pusser

Habitat quality is the cornerstone of winter survival for Virginia's wildlife. Mammals and birds that live in Virginia year-round compete for available food and other resources in order to generate enough body heat and energy to survive throughout the season. One of the most critical components of winter survival is the amount of available cover, and native evergreens are at the top of the list for providing protection from wind, cold, sleet, and snow.

Eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) is highly beneficial for wildlife shelter. It's a "pioneer" species, one of the first woody stemmed plants to get established after a mowed field is abandoned and no longer managed. Fairly slow growing—only one to two feet per year—these trees can live for over 100 years when allowed to become dominant in the landscape in full sun.

A grouping of old redcedar trees, which can grow to heights of 50 to 60 feet and as much as 20 feet wide, will form a wonderful dense mass of branches filled with young, prickly leaves and older, scale-like leaves. Branches closest to the ground provide effective thermal cover that keeps out wind and snow. This living brush offers snug defense for overwintering birds such as chickadees, kinglets, cedar waxwings, and yellow-rumped warblers. Bluebirds and robins are much more likely to stay in an area during the winter months if they can find a thick stand of cedar trees for hunkering down.

The blue colored "berries" of Eastern redcedar are not true berries but modified cones, whose scales have grown together to form a fleshy covering over the seeds within. These berry-like cones grow on female trees in the spring and become mature in the late fall. Redcedar trees are an excellent source of winter food for dozens of bird species, such as bobwhite quail, wild turkeys, ruffed grouse, mockingbirds, goldfinches, and flickers, and for mammals too, including mice, rabbits, raccoons, and opossums.

Another favorite in the winter landscape is the native American holly (*Ilex opaca*), which has thick, broad leaves rather than needles, but is just as hardy and sheltering. Only female trees produce the familiar, showy, red berries that can persist throughout the winter season. These supply much relished food for birds in very late winter or early spring, before other plants have begun growing again.

A winter habitat would be incomplete without a stand of native pine trees. We have several valuable species such as loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) in the coastal plain and Piedmont, the Virginia pine (*Pinus virginiana*), and the equally common shortleaf pine

(*Pinus echinata*). We shouldn't take these familiar evergreens for granted: they form functional windbreaks and screening, escape cover from predators, and abundant seeds for many wildlife species.

Carol A. Heiser is Education Section Manager and Habitat Education Coordinator at the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.



RESOURCES

- ♦ *Common Native Trees of Virginia: Identification Guide*, VA Department of Forestry: www.dof.virginia.gov/infopubs/Native-Tree-ID-spreads_2016_pub.pdf
- ♦ *Regional Native Plant Guides*: www.plantvirginiannatives.org



© Shutterstock / Annette Shaff

Above top: An American robin dines on native American holly, while here, a cedar waxwing enjoys native redcedar berries.

MASTER CHEF WADE TRUONG

I grew up eating a lot of small fish. Some of my most vivid childhood memories were weekend afternoons spent at the local lake, walking the banks with a homemade cane pole and filling stringers with sunfish of various sizes. Catching bigger fish was always the goal, but sunfish, perch, croaker, and spot were always welcome and reliable. Fried, steamed, roasted, or stewed, the smaller catches were treated with as much care and attention as a catch of a keeper rockfish, flounder, or drum.

Having worked in the restaurant industry most of my life, I've been astonished how many people shy away from eating whole fish. Admittedly, there is more nuance to navigating the bones of a perch versus the large flakes of a halibut, but efforts are well worth it. White perch in particular are just as good, if not better, than any of its more glamorous counterparts, like rockfish, flounder, or speckled trout. Cooking small fish whole also maximizes the yield and encourages getting your hands dirty.

I like to fry up a batch of fresh perch, make a tangy and spicy sauce to accompany it, and pick fish like I would crabs- with friends, hoppy beverages, and a lot of laughs.

Rice Flour Fried Perch

Prep time: 15-20 minutes ♦ Serves: 4-6

INGREDIENTS

8-12 whole perch or any small panfish,
scaled and gutted (2-3 per person)
2 cups rice flour



Chili-Lime Ponzu sauce

¼ cup mirin
¼ cup fresh lime juice
3 Tbsp rice wine vinegar
2 Tbsp soy sauce
1-2 chili peppers cut into small pieces

METHOD

With a sharp knife, score the skin and flesh of the fish in a diamond pattern, taking special care not to cut the bones. This increases surface area, allowing for crispier fish and more even cooking.

Season the fish with salt and pepper

Dredge the fish in rice flour and shake off any excess. The rice flour yields a light yet very crispy crust. An extra fine flour like Wondra will also work.

Preheat oil to 350° F and fry in batches (1-2 minutes per side). Allow excess oil to drain and place fish on a paper towel-lined plate and serve immediately.

Mix ingredients for sauce together, add chili peppers, and serve with the fried fish for dipping.

Interested in more recipes? Go to *Fare Game* at: www.dgif.virginia.gov/recipes and www.elevatedwild.com.

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